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The Potential for Racial and Ethnic Change in the US

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Abstract

We inquire into the possibilities for racial and ethnic change during the next quarter century in the US. The argument proceeds in three stages. First, we review the accounts of past racial and ethnic shifts and argue that they are incomplete. Based on social-boundary theory, we claim that non-zero-sum mobility combined with the ability to convert socioeconomic mobility into social proximity to mainstream whites were essential to the successful assimilation of previous racial/ethnic outsiders such as Irish Catholics. Next, we ask whether the condition of non-zero-sum mobility might exist in the present and near future. Our positive answer relies on data that show increasing minority penetration into the top tiers of occupations in the US and the prospects that diversity will grow there as the largely white baby-boom cohorts retire. In the final stage, we ask what contingencies that might affect the extent to which these opportunities for change are fulfilled.

Social scientists take for granted that racial and ethnic origins play a critical, though hardly the exclusive, role in determining the life chances of Americans, whether these are a matter of where they live, how much education they get, what kinds of jobs they do, or whom they marry. An enormous literature establishes that this assumption is generally warranted. For some of the most salient racial divides in the US, such as that between blacks and whites, that literature also demonstrates that numerous differentials in life chances have remained stable for decades. A salient instance concerns residential life chances, which not only involve who the neighbors will be, but what the "quality" of the neighborhood is, where this may be reflected in the risk of criminal victimization, the adequacy of the schools, or other ways. The research on segregation reveals the stability of black-white differences in these respects for at least half a century (Massey and Denton, 1993; Logan et al. 2004). In this sense, one can say that there exists in the US a crystallized racial/ethnic order, with whites occupying the top position and African Americans at the bottom, with others somewhere in between.

There are sound reasons to think that this order influences the chances for success of the second generation. The segmented-assimilation theory about the incorporation of new immigrant groups asserts as much (Portes and Zhou, 1993); and empirical research sustains the view that the children of immigrants find themselves in a society where their options are constrained by the way other Americans view their racial/ethnic membership, even when this does not coincide with the perceptions and beliefs their parents have brought from their societies of origin. Thus, Mary Waters's (1999) research on the West Indian second generation reveals how its members struggle against the racist views that white Americans generally have of individuals with visible African ancestry. The results from the New York second-generation project also demonstrate the importance of group memberships for the trajectories of individuals through early adulthood (Kasinitz et al., forthcoming).

Yet, looking at the past, we also know that the emergence of a massive second generation can unsettle racial and ethnic relations and lead to a reshuffling of the hierarchical order among groups. Enormous literatures, on assimilation and on whiteness, address these changes in the past. They suggest that we ought at least to entertain the notion of some degree of racial and ethnic change in the next few decades, with the arrival of a large and upwardly striving second generation on the scene (see also Alba and Nee, 2003; Bean and Stevens, 2003). This is what we would like to do in this paper on the basis of some results concerning racial and ethnic shifts among the incumbents of highly ranking occupations. We will argue that the shifts already evident, resulting

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probably from demography and affirmative action, combined with those that can be anticipated as a result of the departure of the baby boom cohorts of whites from the labor market, indicate an opportunity for important changes to the racial/ethnic order in the next two decades. If this opportunity is realized, something that is certainly not assured, it will likely usher in a period of unsettlement, when established assumptions about relations between individuals derived from their categorical memberships lose their certainty. This is the justification for the appearance of the word "liminality" in the title, for it refers to a period of transition, when previously fixed identities are suspended. In the final part of the paper, We will consider some contingencies that, based on our knowledge about the incorporation of earlier immigrant groups, will affect whether this opportunity is realized or not.

Our imperfect understanding of the past and why it matters

Racial and ethnic change was a major aspect of the assimilation of European groups during the first six decades of the 20th century (through, say, the election of John F. Kennedy as the first Catholic President). Irish Catholics and southern and eastern European Catholics and Jews were initially viewed as racial outsiders by native white American Protestants and occupied an in-between position in US labor and housing markets (Foner, 2000; Foner and Alba, 2006; Perlmann, 2005; Roediger, 2005). The derogatory language that was routinely applied to southern and eastern European immigrants and their families—e.g., "hunkie" and "guinea"—betrayed their problematic position. Nowhere was this better registered than in the "guinea" slur for Italians, which ultimately derives from the history of slavery, as it refers to the west African coast as well as to the black bondsmen who came from there (Roediger, 2005: 37; see also Alba, 1985). Scientific racism alleging the inferiority of the immigrants provided a major rationale for the restrictive immigration legislation of the 1920s and its national-origin quotas (to say nothing of the complete exclusion of Asian immigrants [Ngai, 2004]).

Yet, during the second half of the 20th century, it became apparent that the racial position of these once-despised groups had shifted fundamentally. In the contemporary parlance, they had been fully incorporated as whites. Without question, they caught up over time to other whites in terms of socioeconomic position and integrated with them in suburbs and through intermarriage (Alba, 1995; Alba and Nee, 2003; Lieberson and Waters, 1988; Perlmann, 2005; Perlmann and Waldinger, 1997). We do not yet possess a completely satisfactory account of how this racial/ethnic uplift occurred. Current theories among historians place the emphasis on the initial legal position of white ethnics, who unlike Asian immigrants could naturalize and thereby attain a modicum of political influence and who were not barred, as were non-whites in many states, from intermarriage with other whites (Jacobson, 1998; Roediger, 2005). Also recognized as important is the intermediate position of the ethnic in the labor market, which translated into greater access to union membership, of significance in an era when unions still monopolized many skilled jobs. Considerable weight is also laid on the consequences of New and Fair Deal policies, as entailed in the legislation and implementation of such innovations as the Federal Housing Authority, the Social Security Act, and the GI Bill, which in their totality gave advantages to ethnic whites in a variety of domains that were withheld from the great majority of African Americans. The political scientist Ira Katznelson (2005) has recently characterized the relevant laws and policies as "affirmative action" for whites.

The historical account, however, slights something that we want to emphasize here: namely, the occurrence in mid-century America of non-zero-sum mobility, generated in this case by massive changes in socioeconomic structures. These changes are indicated in: the transformation of the college and university system, which in a period of just a quarter century 1940—65, expanded several times over and thus accommodated many more students than before; the great expansion in the middle and upper reaches of the occupational system, creating room for newer groups to move up; and the drastic reorganization of residential space, characterized by the emergence of many new suburban communities where white families of diverse ethnic origins could buy homes and mix. One way of summarizing these changes is to say that they occurred through structurally generated mobility that brought second- and third-generation ethnics into positions of parity with other white Americans at work and outside of it, because of educational and occupational advance, residential mobility and intermarriage.

We will claim here that non-zero-sum-mobility, often generated by structural changes such as the expansion of the middle and upper portions of the occupational structure during the middle of the last century, has a special significance for racial/ethnic boundary change. Such mobility does not require downward mobility by members of

more privileged groups in order for upward mobility by the less privileged to occur. Consequently, upward mobility is less likely to be accompanied by an intensification of competition along ethnic and racial lines, and the lower temperature of competition allows for the relaxation of boundaries. Note, in particular, that for the white ethnics this relaxation is not simply a matter of working alongside previously more privileged whites: ethnic whites were not only upwardly mobile in socioeconomic terms but able then to translate socioeconomic improvements into greater social proximity to other whites through residential and other changes.

Based on this brief analysis, the next question obviously is: will non-zero-sum mobility occur in the future in a way that affects the prospects for the second and third generations issuing from contemporary immigration? Might such mobility also affect African Americans? There is pessimism about the possibilities for mobility today because of economic structural changes, and it undergirds the original formulation of segmented-assimilation theory (Gans, 1992; Portes and Zhou, 1993). However, this pessimism overlooks the likelihood of mobility occurring as the number of European Americans available to take good jobs declines, relatively, if not absolutely. This decline is predictable from the demographic shifts of the US population. It also overlooks the potential impact of affirmative action—especially in higher education (Bowen and Bok, 1998; Massey et al., 2002; Skrentny, 2002)—and thus the likely rise in the number of minority-group members who are positioned to take good jobs. These demographic and institutional forces could mean, then, mobility for some individuals who are now regarded as members of non-European minorities. The growth of the middle-class portions of these groups could weaken ethnic and racial divisions, at least for middle-class individuals, if mobility is also associated with a narrowing of the social distance from whites.

Some contemporary evidence of racial/ethnic shift

Shifts are visible in the recruitment into good jobs in the American economy. To show them, we rank order occupations by the average remuneration received by their full-time incumbents. We then slice into this hierarchy in ways that account for different fractions of the full-time labor force: for example, the best-paid occupations needed to account for 10 percent of the labor force, or the top decile; and the top quartile as defined equivalently. It should be noted that individuals are presented here according to their (detailed) occupation and its average pay for full-time workers, not according to their own pay. This prevents the classification from bias against the achievements of younger workers, who, though they may be pursuing well-paid occupations, are often paid below the average. The data come from the 2000 Census and are supplemented with recently released data from the 2005 American Community Survey.

Table 1 shows the racial, ethnic, and nativity characteristics of the incumbents of top jobs in the top decile and quartile by age group (birth cohort) according to the 2000 Census. This table demonstrates unequivocally that the racial/ethnic origins of the incumbents of the best jobs in the US labor force are changing. The reasons for the shifts are subject to speculation, but it is plausible to think that demographic changes in the population and affirmative action figure prominently among them. In the oldest age group, individuals aged 55-64 in 2000, 84 percent of the incumbents of the best jobs, whether defined as those of the top quartile or decile, were native-born non-Hispanic whites. This fraction decreases very slightly in the next oldest age group (45-54 in 2000), but is lowered more noticeably with each younger group. Among those aged 25-34 in 2000, 74 percent of the top quartile jobs and 72 percent of the top decile are native-born whites. Indeed, 22-23 percent of these top jobs are held in this age group by non-whites and Hispanics; this fraction has doubled between the oldest and youngest cohorts.

Table 2 shows the equivalent data for the same birth cohorts as updated in the 2005 American Community Survey; to them we add the data for relatively new entrants to the labor force, aged 25-29 in that year. The table emphasizes even more strongly the split between the older cohorts and the younger ones. While a shift in the direction of greater minority representation begins with the cohort then aged 40-49, it becomes very pronounced in the two youngest cohorts, in the ages younger than 40. In fact, it appears to be occurring not only across cohorts but also within them over time: comparing the 30-39 age group of 2005 to the same birth cohort in the 2000 data, increasing representation of non-whites and Hispanics has continued in the first years of the 21st century; consequently, the fraction of top-quartile jobs occupied by US-born non-Hispanic whites has declined from 74 to 70 percent. The levels of minority representation in the youngest cohort, aged 25-29, are the same as those in the 30-39 year-old group.

Both tables, but especially the second, demonstrate that the gains in minority representation in top occupations are going only partly to the US born, including the second generation. To be sure, in Table 2, the representation of US-born Hispanics has tripled between the oldest and youngest cohorts and that of US-born blacks has doubled. Nevertheless, immigrants, especially from Asia, are also increasing their share. Overall, for instance, the foreign born account for 16 percent of top-decile jobs among the 25-29 year-olds of 2005, with the Asian foreign born alone taking up 9 percent. We have not yet determined how many of these foreign born individuals are members of the 1.5 generation, who have grown up in immigrant households. Almost certainly, though, a hefty proportion is made up of individuals who arrived in the US as adults, either during their student years or afterwards. The large share of top jobs filled by immigrants reveals an alternative to the recruitment of US-born minorities that could compensate for any decline in the number of non-Hispanic whites available for these positions.

In the event, equality of chances to occupy the best jobs has not been attained: whites remain very privileged. Thus, non-Hispanic blacks represent 12-13 percent of the 25-29 age group in the 2005 ACS (which does not include, it should be noted, the incarcerated population), but they constitute only about half that fraction in the best-paid occupations. The disproportion is even greater in the case of Hispanics, who are about 20 percent of the age group, but no more than 8 percent of the incumbents of good jobs. In any event, the absence of a substantial dent in white privilege is an expected feature of a non-zero-sum mobility situation, which entails little or no change to the perceptions whites have of the opportunities open to them and to their children.

What sorts of changes are to be anticipated by, say, 2020? Overall change in the composition of the top jobs is programmed by the succession of cohorts, which will lead to the massive disappearance from the labor market of the job incumbents who were aged 45-64 in 2000. These are the cohorts most dominated by native-born non-Hispanic whites, and their places will be taken by the cohorts aged 25-44 in 2000, where the presence of non-whites and Hispanics has increased markedly.

What will the composition of the younger cohorts look like in 2020? It is impossible to say for certain, in part because the answer must depend on future immigration. But two observations point to further increases in the proportions of minorities in top jobs. One is the decline in the absolute number of native-born non-Hispanic whites available to take these jobs: this is particularly noticeable in the birth cohort that in 2020 will take the place of the 35-44 years olds of 2000, as show in Table 3. The native-born white incumbents of top jobs in that age group were recruited from a population that, despite the mortality by early middle age, still numbered nearly 31 million individuals. However, as of 2000, the 15-24 year-olds who will replace them contained only 24 million native-born non-Hispanic whites, and mortality is likely to winnow this group by at least a million million between 2000 and 2020. By comparison, there is a rough stability of native-born whites between the 25-34 year-olds of 2000 and the cohort that forms their replacements, aged 5-14 in the census.

However, even population stability would not guarantee the white share of these jobs, whose number is likely to increase. Between 2000 and 2020, Census Bureau population projections suggest a total population increase on the order of 20 percent. Very likely, the occupations that we have designated as the top quartile and decile will expand in rough correspondence to the population, and the recruitment to them will have to expand accordingly. That will probably mean that the share of whites in these jobs will decline. The fall-off is likely to be especially sharp among the 35-44 year-olds of 2020: if the recruitment of native-born whites to these jobs remains at the same proportion relative to the population base as it was in 2000, then there will only be enough of them to fill about half of the available positions.

A drop this great seems an unlikely outcome, and in any event one cannot predict the future changes in top jobs with any precision. Perhaps, the recruitment of native-born whites to these jobs will cut more deeply into that population in the future than it has in the past. Perhaps the decline in the availability of qualified non-Hispanic whites will be made up by greater immigration. We don’ t know, but forecasting some degree of continuing decline in the non-Hispanic white share of the best-paid occupations seems a safe bet, given the changes of the recent past and foreseeable demographic shifts.

Some contingencies

Much has been made of the so-called “ hourglass” economy, and there has been considerable attention to the expansion of the bad-job portion of the economy (Bernhardt et al., 2001). However, despite this pessimism, there are built-in demographic changes that, in combination with the institutional changes inaugurated by the civil-rights era,

are likely to bring a much larger number of non-whites and Hispanics into the worlds of middle-class and upper-middle-class whites on a basis of rough parity. Should they occur, these changes would not mean an end to racial and ethnic inequalities: when groups are compared in the aggregate, they will continue to show large average disparities. But behind them, there is likely to be some reshuffling, if the overlaps between the overall distributions of white and minority status increase. This is another way of saying that a growing number of minorities will probably interact on a regular basis and as equals with whites as well as others whose origins are different from their own, and most whites will likely find themselves increasingly confronted with inescapable diversity. Such an interpenetration of social worlds is anticipated by assimilation theory.

The next few decades seem to offer an extraordinary opportunity for minority mobility and for a reshuffling of the major racial/ethnic boundaries of US society, which David Hollinger (1995) has described with the phrase, "racial/ethnic pentagon." Yet, other than a more diverse mainstream than exists today, it is impossible to be very precise about the nature of the changes that may occur. This is in part because they will not be dictated by demographic and socioeconomic structures, which are to a great degree predictable, but forged by human agents. Thus, among the questions that remain to be answered are the following:

1. To what extent will socioeconomically mobile minorities be able to realize broader social gains from their entry into higher status occupational spheres? Assimilation in its broadest sense depends the ability to integrate into mainstream social settings—to mix with whites and others of the same socioeconomic strata and to provide a favorable starting position for one's children. An enormous stream of research about African Americans shows that, because of discrimination and institutional racism, they have generally been unable to realize these gains—for instance, they have usually been confined to largely black residential areas regardless of their economic attainments (e.g., Massey and Denton, 1993). What research there is suggests so far that Asians and light-skinned Hispanics are not as constrained in residential choice as blacks have been (Alba et al., 2000; South et al., 2005).

Intermarriage is another way of gaining insight into changes in social distance that may come about with rising socioeconomic status. Indicative is not simply the overall rate of intermarriage, but the gradient in that rate associated with a measure of socioeconomic position, such as educational attainment. The recent research of Qian and Lichter (2007) sheds light on this matter. It shows that Asian and Hispanic intermarriage with whites is very common among the highly educated; for the US-born members of these groups, the rates hover in the 40-60 percent range depending on the precise category. This finding demonstrates that socioeconomic advance is, in many cases, accompanied by social integration. However, for African Americans, the same pattern does not appear: highly educated blacks do not improve their chances of intermarriage with whites above the low frequencies that obtain for the group as a whole. The rise in the rate of black-white intermarriage in recent decades has not brought African Americans to parity even with other non-white minorities.

2. To what extent will the decline in the number of whites in birth cohorts coming of age during the next two decades lead to enhanced opportunities for working-class whites rather than for minorities? A challenge to the notion that a major racial/ethnic reordering lies ahead in the near future is the possibility that white privilege will continue to exert a powerful hold on channels of mobility and whites of lower socioeconomic origins will rise to occupy the positions coming open. To be sure, some degree of racial/ethnic change is already visible in the shifts across cohorts within the highest occupational tiers, but future change will be constrained to the extent that whites can exploit new opportunities.

3. To what extent will majority Americans be willing to invest in the educations of minority and immigrant-origin youth, to enable them to take advantage of opportunities for mobility? The public school system in the US, especially in heavily minority areas, is increasingly in disarray, troubled by segregation and inadequacies of funding (such as California' s Proposition 13). Poor educational institutions will limit the ability to youth from low income families to rise far above their origins and seize the occupational positions that will be available because of the decline in the number of whites.

4. To what extent will American society resort to the recruitment of immigrants trained partly or wholly in their home countries to fill jobs requiring high levels of qualification? Relying on immigrants is an alternative to the training of minority and immigrant-origin youth to replace the declining numbers of whites, and a cheap one at that since much of the cost of educating highly qualified workers is borne by other countries. In recent years, the US has expanded its in-take of highly trained foreigners through the H-1B visa program, for example, which remains a tool that national policymakers can draw on. [i]It is apparent in the data we have presented that immigrants are taking a disproportionate number of top jobs, indicating the viability of this alternative.

5. Will future changes affect African Americans and immigrant-origin groups equally? One of the profoundly rooted patterns in US history is the preference for immigrants over native minorities, especially African Americans (Waldinger, 1996; Waldinger and Lichter, 2003). This pattern operated during the 20th century in the ability of once-despised southern and eastern European groups, such as the southern Italians, to distance themselves from black Americans and rise into the white American mainstream. This historical process is of course the subject of the whiteness literature, which has emphasized, to my mind excessively, the devices employed by the immigrant ethnics to separate themselves from blacks and to gain acceptance as whites. There is a substantial risk of this pattern repeating itself in the contemporary era. This risk is visible in two ways: the continuing preference of majority Americans for immigrants, who are seen as unlike blacks in the degree to which they work hard to improve their lives and to provide opportunities for their children (Gans, 1999; Waldinger and Lichter, 2003); and the emerging tensions between immigrants and black Americans. In a study I am co-directing of new Latin American immigrants in the smaller cities of upstate New York, we have found that the immigrants find African Americans to be very hostile while white Americans are perceived as welcoming or, at worst, neutral. Hence, the immigrants, who often live side by side with American Americans in very poor neighborhoods, are motivated to separate themselves from native minorities as soon as they can. This could lead to the emergence of the African American/non-African American distinction as the key fault line in US society.

In sum, the opportunity to alter the racial and ethnic boundaries of American society through increasing diversity at its middle and upper levels, achieved by the mobility into these tiers of the second generation and of native minorities is, in the end, just that: an opportunity, not a sure thing. To realize it, the US will need to invest more in the education of the young people from immigrant and minority backgrounds and to keep free the channels of upward mobility available to them. But the chance to realize significant racial and ethnic change does not come around very often. Promoting the policies that will help to bring such changes about seems a worthy goal those who possess knowledge about the processes involved.

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Table 1 The racial, ethnic, and nativity composition (%) of the best-paid occupations by age group, 2000

	NB non-Hisp whites	FB non-Hisp whites	NB non-Hisp blacks	FB non-Hisp blacks	NB Hisp	FB Hisp	NB Asians	FB Asians	NB others	FB others	N (1000s)
Ages 55—64											
Top quartile	83.8	4.8	3.6	0.5	1.3	1.4	0.4	2.9	1.0	0.3	2,555.5 100.0%
Top decile	83.9	5.5	2.6	0.3	1.1	1.4	0.5	3.6	0.9	0.3	1,213.1 100.0%
Ages 45—54											
Top quartile	82.3	4.1	4.7	0.6	1.8	1.5	0.6	3.0	1.2	0.4	6,296.3 100.0%
Top decile	82.5	4.7	3.8	0.4	1.6	1.4	0.7	3.5	1.1	0.4	3,029.0 100.0%
Ages 35—44											
Top quartile	78.1	4.6	5.1	0.9	2.8	2.1	0.7	4.1	1.2	0.5	7,403.2 100.0%
Top decile	77.8	5.4	4.3	0.7	2.4	1.9	0.9	5.1	1.1	0.5	3,705.6 100.0%
Ages 25—34											
Top quartile	73.9	4.2	5.6	0.7	4.1	2.3	1.2	5.9	1.5	0.6	5,249.0 100.0%
Top decile	72.0	5.0	4.8	0.7	3.4	2.1	1.6	8.4	1.4	0.7	2,525.9 100.0%

Notes: The top quartile encompasses the best-paid occupations sufficient to account for a quartile of the full-time labor force; the top decile is defined equivalently. Aside from "others," the racial categories include only individuals who report unmixed racial backgrounds; those with mixed racial backgrounds are place in the "other" group.

Table 2 The racial, ethnic, and nativity composition (%) of the best-paid occupations by age group, 2005

	NB non-Hisp whites	FB non-Hisp whites	NB non-Hisp blacks	FB non-Hisp blacks	NB Hisp	FB Hisp	NB Asians	FB Asians	NB others	FB others
Ages 60—69										
Top quartile	82.5	4.6	3.3	0.6	2.0	1.6	0.5	3.8	1.0	0.1
Top decile	82.7	5.2	2.5	0.4	1.4	1.5	0.5	4.5	0.9	0.9
Ages 50—59										
Top quartile	81.7	3.8	4.6	0.8	2.4	1.5	0.7	3.4	1.0	0.2
Top decile	82.3	4.8	3.5	0.6	1.9	1.4	0.8	3.8	0.8	0.1
Ages 40—49										
Top quartile	77.0	3.8	5.7	1.1	3.4	2.2	0.9	4.7	1.2	0.2
Top decile	77.0	4.8	4.5	0.7	2.8	2.0	1.1	5.9	1.2	0.2
Ages 30—39										
Top quartile	70.0	4.0	6.7	1.0	5.0	2.8	1.4	7.5	1.4	0.2
Top decile	67.9	5.1	5.5	0.8	4.2	2.3	1.9	10.7	1.2	0.3
Ages 25—29										
Top quartile	70.2	3.0	6.5	0.8	6.5	2.5	2.6	6.1	1.6	0.3
Top decile	68.1	4.0	5.4	0.6	5.2	2.3	3.4	9.1	1.6	0.4

Table 3 US-born, non-Hispanic white birth cohorts, counted in 2000 and projected for 2020

Age groups	2000 (1000s)	2020 (1000s)	% change
55—64	17,975.0	27,974.3	+55.6
45—54	26,947.2	22,991.4	−14.7
35—44	30,560.7	23,084.8	−24.5
25—34	23,910.4	24,464.3	+2.3
15—24	23,579.2	—	
5—14	24,784.0	—	

Note: Projections have been calculated by applying survival rates from the United States Life Tables for whites (NCHS, 2002).

National Center for Health Statistics. 2002. United States Life Tables, 2000, NVSR Volume 51, Number 3; http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/pubs/pubd/nvsr/51/51_03.htm.

[i] I thank Alejandro Portes for reminding me of the potential for newly arriving immigrants, rather than the second generation, to provide the labor needed at the top.